

Federal Register Notice entitled: 2020 Post-Census Group Quarters Review (PCGQR)
Comment by Andrew A. Beveridge, Ph.D., President and Co-Founder of Social Explorer
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Introduction

Social Explorer is an entity that supplies Census, as well as, an array of other data, maps and visualizations to a wide range of users at colleges and universities; non-profit and for profit entities. It also supports the courseware used in many colleges and universities throughout the United States by supplying interactive maps, graphs, and charts for about 300 different courseware packages (the digital version of textbooks) that students are assigned and use at institutions of higher education throughout the United States. Many of these materials uses Census data. Now and for some 30 years, I have had a contract with the New York *Times* to help in their reporting on data and trends, largely in the United States. Most recently we processed all 51 states on the day the Census redistricting file was released and provided data to the *Times* that was used in a large project to show the patterns of race and ethnic change throughout the United States during the past decade, as well as in multiple other stories.

In addition, I use Census data in my scholarly work (I am an Emeritus Professor of Sociology and taught and did research since 1973 first at Columbia University and then starting in 1981 at Queens College and the Graduate Center of CUNY.) I also use Census data in a wide array of consulting engagements, including serving as an expert witness using Census and other data in cases involving housing discrimination, jury system disparities, profiling by law enforcement authorities, and redistricting. I have engaged in these activities since at least 1993.

I make this comment in my personal capacity, and it may not reflect the opinion of any entity with which I am currently associated or with which I have been associated in the past. However, this comment is based upon my experience using Census data, that includes Group Quarters information.

Importance of Carefully Reviewing Group Quarters Counts and Characteristics

It is particularly important for group quarters counts and characteristics (including their location, and type of group quarters) to be accurately reported and published along with the census results after the fact. If they are not, such errors not only affect the data regarding group quarters, but also the counts and characteristics of the jurisdiction in which they reside, most particularly age, race, and Hispanic status. For purposes of this comment, I will relate three examples of group quarters issues drawn from my own work. In each case, the classification (including misclassification and mislocation of group quarters population and characteristics) has substantial effects on not only the group quarters population itself, but the jurisdiction in which they reside.

I believe that the Bureau expand its review process so that errors found post-publication be fully addressed and recorded in user notes or updates, regardless of how and where they are found. Currently and in the proposed PCGQR much of the burden regarding finding and following up on errors is placed upon various governmental entities and bringing them to the Census Bureau attention for adjudication of whether they should be corrected. Rather the Bureau should develop and apply a post-publication process that works to find and corrects such errors itself and with the feedback of all stakeholders, including non-governmental actors and even users. Since the Bureau and no one else has access to the confidential Census Edited File (the CEF) a variety of edit checks could be developed and applied before publication. Once the data is initially published, any errors found by the Bureau or other should be documented with corrections applied to the published results in the form of corrected tables.

A similar process is done by the geography division, and I do not see why it could not be expanded and applied to the population enumeration. Such a process would only increase public confidence in the Census data. The current process now can turn the Group Quarters error resolution process into an adversarial process, rather than a collaborative effort to find the best answer. The advent of the PCGQR process could be the begin of a new approach to quality assurance for the bureau. Finding and correcting errors is one of the ongoing efforts in many large-scale survey operations, there is no reason that the census should not have a similar process.

Below I present three different examples that are related to issues regarding group quarters, but which have implications for population data, including characteristics, in general. Each of them resulted or could result in changes not just in population counts, but also in the characteristics of those counts.

Mischaracterization of the inmates of the Louisiana State Penitentiary (known as Angola Prison) in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana

Working on a project regarding West Feliciana, I was asked to review the striking change in the non-Hispanic black population between 2010 and 2020. (A more complete discussion of this is in Exhibit 1 to this comment, and this discussion draws upon that.)

“According to the Census 2020 results, when compared with the 2010 results, in West Feliciana there was little total population change. The total population were similar 15,625 in the 2010 Census and 15,310 according to the 2020 Census. However, the number of non-Hispanic white residents had increased by 2,583, while the non-Hispanic black population had declined by 3,686. This had the effect of changing the racial composition of the population in West Feliciana from 46.3 percent non-Hispanic black to 23.4 percent. No explanation for that change that implicated the household count and characteristics seemed credible.” (See Exhibit 1.)

Using the data reported in PL94-171, it was possible to make a reasonable estimate of the composition of the population imprisoned in Angola. As shown and further described in Exhibit 1, the composition of the prisoners apparently changed from 74.60 percent non-Hispanic black in 2010 to 15.85 percent in 2020, while the non-Hispanic white population went from 24.85 percent to 74.89 percent. Since the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections reports that male inmates in Louisiana are 68.7 percent black, while the 2015-2019 ACS reports substantially fewer white residents in institutional group quarters in the five parishes including West Feliciana, and roughly half of such institutional group quarters population is in West Feliciana. (The analysis is further elaborated in Exhibit 1.)

In short, the characteristics are plainly wrong, and should be corrected for any data use going forward. Presumably these sorts of errors can be ascertained by doing simple consistency checks between the 2010 and 2020 Census, as well as using internal data from the ACS. Such errors since they are both gross and obvious erode the confidence in the Census data and its use for both mandated and other uses. Whether such errors are brought to the attention of the Bureau by the State of Louisiana or other governmental entity or whether they were uncovered by a user such as me, has no bearing on whether the error existed. In either scenario, the error should be corrected.

Mislocating Greenhaven Prison in Milan Town in New York in 2000

Working on an analysis regarding a housing discrimination case in 2009 through 2012, I used data first considering Milan Town in 1990 and 2000. In 1990, Milan was reported to have population of 1,895, including 16 Non-Hispanic African Americans and 48 Hispanics. In 2000 the year I used initially for my analysis Milan reportedly had a population of 4,573 including 716 Hispanics and 1,188 non-Hispanic African American. By accident the Census had apparently moved the population and characteristics of Greenhaven Prison consisting of some 2,303 persons from Beekman to Milan. This caused the large changes in the reported size and composition of both Towns in 2000, and a reversion to a more accurate count and composition in 2010. Using several tables in 2000 SF1, it was possible to detect

and correct the error. The actual number of persons in Milan Town after the adjustments were made was 2,356 with 31 Non-Hispanic African Americans and 63 Hispanics. An offsetting adjustment would need to be made for Beekman.

These errors have never been formally corrected or acknowledged even though they were obvious. Leaving these sorts of error in the Census data cast doubt on the whole census enterprise. They also make the data much less useful. Apparently, the governments of Beekman, Milan and Dutchess County did not raise a question about these incredible results. When I found them, I was most concerned about how to deal with them in the context of the housing discrimination case, in which I was serving as the plaintiff's expert. But it was also the case, that given Bureau procedures there would be no way for me to communicate with the Bureau, nor would there be anyway to correct them so that the next user would not face the complex issues of removing the error that I did.

Classification of Non-Institutional and Institutional Group Quarters Facilities

Working on an ongoing engagement in Suffolk County, New York I have carefully compared those who are living in group quarters (institutional or non-institutional) using the ACS 2015-2019 file. However, there is no way to verify the type of facilities that are classified as group quarters from the 2020 Census, even though there is a count for each block of persons in each type of group quarters identified by the Census. That information is in the classification of the residents into one of several types of group quarters that the Census provides. To know for sure that there are group quarters in a specific block one must compare the classification of population by group quarters with the presence of one or more group quarters on a specific block. However, given the fact that neither population nor characteristics are invariant at the block level, recourse to an auxiliary file that gives a count of group quarters by census block does not give one surety of accuracy. Any inconsistencies between the classification of individuals to specific type of group quarters and those residing in them cannot be checked. Whether they are due to the new Disclosure Avoidance System, to a counting error, to a classification error, or to something else, makes the usability of these data quite questionable. Plainly, if group quarters were available by type of group quarters facility, then such analyses would be more persuasive. Knowing with certainty that any inconsistencies were caused by the new Disclosure Avoidance System would also help clarify these issues. (Unfortunately, I am unable to share more currently because this particular analysis is ongoing.)

General Comments Regarding the Proposed Post Census Group Quarters Review (PCGQR)

Based upon some of the issues found in Group Quarters and their presentation in the Census, several things are plain:

- 1) There are current issues with the counts and characteristics of Group Quarters, as well as with the impact of group quarters enumeration upon the overall enumeration. All these issues should be correctable in the PCGQR.
- 2) The proposal for a PCGQR is a step in the right direction. However, it seems to leave only room for formal complaints made by "official" government agencies. Based upon the review from the CQR in the past, it is obvious that not every municipality or other agency is ready or able to review. Furthermore, users as well as governments, may have an interest in correcting data errors. Instead, the PCGQR, should have a procedure that allows any interested party to question Census results. Furthermore, there could be a general Quality Assurance program that would take in suspected errors and try to get them resolved, short of what is a more or less an adversary process.

Exhibit 1.

Analysis of the Grossly Incorrect Results Regarding the Racial Composition (White and Black) of Angola Prison (Louisiana State Prison) in West Feliciana Parish.

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Summary—The racial composition of the population in the Angola Prison in West Feliciana was obviously misstated in the 2020 Census. The number and percent of non-Hispanic black residents of the prison reportedly plunged by 2,982 or 58.75 percent. While the number and percent of non-Hispanic white residents exploded by 2,808 or 50.34 percent. Reversing the prison's racial composition from 74.60 percent non-Hispanic black to 15.85 percent, while the non-Hispanic white percent went from 24.55 percent to 74.89 percent. These numbers and percentages are inconsistent with the general composition of prisons reported by the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, by the American Community Survey PUMs data for the PUMA that includes West Feliciana, and anecdotal reports by those who live near and visit the prison.

In short, these number represent a gross error in the reporting of the characteristics of those incarcerated in Angola. They also have a large effect on the reported racial composition of West Feliciana. However, at this writing it is impossible to determine how this error may have occurred. It seems to be the result of a reversal of the coding of race, that is those who are white seem to have been categorized as black and vice versa. It is possible that this could be due to inaccurate data that were shared with the Census Bureau from the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, and were never edit checked, or the result of an inaccurate imputation, or due to processing errors by the Bureau, when it ran the new DAS and prepared the data for release. At this writing further analysis will need to be performed to understand whether this is an error only affecting Angola Prison, one of the largest if not the largest prison in the United States, or that it is an example of a more general problem.

Background

Based upon a very striking change in the racial composition in the 2020 Census compared to the 2010 Census for West Feliciana Parish, I was asked to review what could have caused that change, and whether it could imply that there was a serious error in the reported racial composition of West Feliciana and portions of the parish.

According to the Census 2020 results, when compared with the 2010 results, in West Feliciana there was little total population change. The total population were similar 15,625 in the 2010 Census and 15,310 according to the 2020 Census. However, the number of non-Hispanic white resident had increased by 2,583, while the non-Hispanic black population had declined by 3,686. This had the effect of changing the racial composition of the population in West Feliciana from 46.3 percent non-Hispanic black to 23.4 percent. No explanation that implicated the household count and characteristics seemed credible.

Analysis Methods and Comparisons

I decided to analyze the changes of the racial composition in the Angola Prison. Group quarters type is reported at the block level, but not race and Hispanic composition. However, since Angola prison was completely

encompassed by one block in 2010 and by three blocks in 2020 it is possible to get a very good estimate of the composition of the Prison itself. As Table 1, shows, of the one block that encompassed all of Angola Prison in 2010, only six people were not classified as living in group quarters. Therefore, the composition of the block is a very good approximation of the composition of Angola Prison in 2010. In 2020, as Table 1 also shows, Angola Prison now includes three blocks. For those three blocks, all but 174 persons are classified as living in a correctional facility. So, the composition of those three blocks is a very good approximation of the composition of Angola Prison in 2020. Therefore, the figures in Table 1 are a very good estimate of the purported differences in the composition of the residents of Angola prison for the two Census years.

Table 1

Comparison of Composition of Block or Blocks Containing Angola Prison							
		Total population:	Population in Correctional Facilities	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	NH White	NH Black
Angola Prison 2010		5,153	5,147	13	5,140	1,265	3,844
			99.88%	0.25%	99.75%	24.55%	74.60%
Angola Prison 2020		5,439	5,265	423	5,016	4,073	862
			96.80%	7.78%	92.22%	74.89%	15.85%
Census Blocks Comprising Prison 2020							
Census Tract	Block	Total population	Population in Correctional Facilities	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	NH White	NH Black
22125980000	1025	4,571	4,571	349	4,222	3,413	748
22125980000	1001	523	349	28	495	414	68
22125980000	1021	345	345	46	299	246	46
22125980000	Total	5,439	5,265	423	5,016	4,073	862
			96.80%	7.78%	92.22%	74.89%	15.85%

The annual report of the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections for 2020 page 21 has a chart that reports that 68.7 percent of all male inmates are black. Furthermore, an analysis of the composition of all institutional group quarter residents in the PUMA 01400 which includes West Feliciana, East Feliciana, Iberville, Pointe Coupee, and West Baton Rouge finds that 65.6 percent of the 11,008 are non-Hispanic black. It should be noted that about half of these residents are in Angola prison, and the 3,130 non-Hispanic white residents reported by the ACS in the PUMA that contains five parishes including West Feliciana are almost 300 fewer than those reported in Angola Prison by Census 2020.

In short, all these comparisons make it obvious that a serious error occurred in the classification of the race and Hispanic status of those in Angola Prison with respect to black and white. Though this analysis can document this problem, one can only speculate on its genesis, nor has analysis been done to see if this problem is specific to Angola Prison or more general.